

# The Story of Fort Standish

and the last smoothbore gun to defend Duxbury

By JOE SHEA

With the threat of coastal raiders on their minds, the Union Army determined that a series of forts and defensive positions was needed along the coast to protect shipping and trade. The older Fort Andrew, on the Gurnet, used during the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 was not positioned correctly for the protection of Plymouth Harbor and Duxbury Bay. A new fort was needed to support more and heavier guns as well as more people.

The threat was expected to be from fast steam-powered coastal raiders that could speed by Fort Andrew but had to slow down to maneuver the channels off Saquish. Then, as now, ships of any size were limited in the navigation and would be exposed to naval gunfire for a longer period of time. On Saquish the U.S. Army built a new style of fort. It was called Fort Standish and was an earthen breastworks style. Like Fort Andrew, it was made up of earthen berms up to 60 feet wide, behind which the guns could be sheltered from return fire. The earthworks could absorb extraordinary impacts from exploding shells and only dirt would fly through the air. Fort Standish was 180 feet deep and 340 feet wide to the outside of the parapets. There were five gun positions, one on each corner and one on the center of the wall along the bay. There were sheltered "bombproof" quarters and ammunition magazines set into the walls with heavy roofs. The parapets and the breastworks have survived the 140 years since.

From these bluffs on Saquish the fort could command the channel and defend the anchorages between Browns Shoals and Saquish Neck and the "Cowyard" as well as the inner entrance to Plymouth Harbor.

Garrison duty at Fort Standish fell to the 24th Unattached Company, which was mustered on December 16, 1864 for one year of service at both Fort Andrew and Fort Standish. The 24th was staffed with soldiers from the local area and names of the soldiers reads like a local history lesson: Weston, Reed, Winsor, Alden, Ryder, Thomas, Lapham, Hunt, Ford, Freeman, Rogers, Sampson, Southworth, Peterson and Bosworth to name a few. There was no need for a great many men on site at one time so it is likely that these men spent a fair amount of time at home. Other unattached companies would have preceded and followed the 24th. They were unattached to any Massachusetts Regiment and called for one year of service.

Fort Standish was equipped with five smoothbore guns of a class known as Columbiad, developed just for coastal defense. They were not suitable for shipboard use, or for use by a mobile army in the field. These were eight inch guns that weighed 8,465 pounds each. The effective range of fire being up to 2 1/2 miles, they were capable of sweeping the channel with withering fire. A modern innovation had those guns installed on raised wooden decks with a steel track assembly.

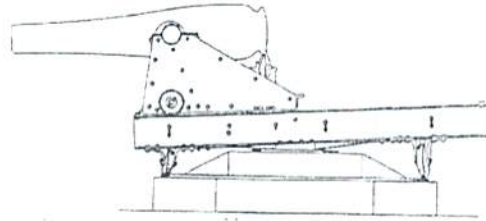
Combined with a three inch steel pivot pin the guns could easily be swung in such a way that four of the five guns always had bearing on the target and could track the target as it moved past the fort and maneuvered in the bay. The gun was mounted on an iron frame with wheels that allowed the gun to rotate on the pivot point. With that ability each gun could cover a field of fire in excess of 210 degrees.

In a routine survey of the deactivated fort conducted in 1884, it was noted that one ordnance sergeant was stationed at the fort and he lived in quarters outside the fort. The bomb proofing as well as the platforms were so decayed as to be worthless. The parapets and the berms were found to be in good condition, as they seem to be today more than 125 years after being built.

The guns were still there in 1872 but likely removed shortly afterwards. That type of gun was useless for any military application and were often dumped into concrete to act as rebar or disposed of in many creative ways. The value in cast iron would not cover the costs of hauling the heavy guns very far. None of those guns ever came ashore in Duxbury for display purposes. The guns are long gone thus bringing to a close the final chapter of smoothbore cannons defending the Town of Duxbury.

Smoothbore cannons had been in service almost from the invention of gunpowder. However, they had evolved as far as they could by 1863. Technology spelled the end of smoothbore cannons.

The fort remains in good condition but before you visit you must realize that the old fort is now private property and the owner's rights must be respected.



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